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# high water

a floodplain management newsletter

Volume 39

March 1990

## Flooding in the Flathead a close call for many

Unusual weather conditions in northwestern Montana brought unexpected winter flooding to the Flathead area this November. On November 10th, a warm air mass over that corner of the state boosted temperatures up to 59 degrees, rapidly melting the snowpack in the mountains. Runoff from the snow was augmented by two days of unseasonably heavy rains. For the 48-hour period beginning the evening of November 10th, the National Weather Service reported 3.2 inches of rain at Columbia Falls, 3.9 inches at West Glacier, 4.8 inches at Essex, and 4.98 inches at Marias Pass.

Despite this deluge, the Hungry Horse Dam did its job and protected the town of Columbia Falls from flooding. Rick Clark, chief of operations at the reservoir, told the Hungry Horse News that the reservoir "took in 124,207 acre-feet of water" from November 10th through the 12th. "That's 153 percent of normal. The average for the whole month is only 81,110 acre feet," Clark said. The Flathead River near Columbia Falls reached 13.3 feet, barely over its banks. Without the dam, the river would have been more than 5 feet over flood stage.

Brian Kennedy photo



The Middle Fork of the Flathead River races past Jenny and Michelle Paulson's back porch at West Glacier.

Over on the Middle Fork of the Flathead River the threat of flooding was more severe. Kim Potter, Disaster and Emergency Services Coordinator for Flathead County, reported to the Hungry Horse News that "it originally looked like it was going to be an isolated problem." However, the water continued to rise and peaked on the morning of November 12th, nearly four feet over flood stage.

Potter and Flathead County Sheriff, Chuck Rhodes, responded quickly once they were informed of the high runoff situation. They asked radio stations to warn citizens of the flash flooding conditions. The local media credited Potter and Rhodes with giving hunters and others in low-lying areas enough warning to evacuate to higher ground.

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yet"**

Flathead County's floodplain regulations may have also helped reduce the amount of potential risk and damage from the flooding. Potter told the Floodplain Management Section that the regulations prevented construction of a proposed residential development in the floodplain of the Middle Fork of the Flathead. Potter said, if the homes had been built, "people would have been stranded because the access road was covered with water and

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Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation



they would have definitely been at risk."

Flood damages were reported throughout the Middle Fork and Columbia Falls area. The Flathead River near Columbia Falls claimed a hunter's camper. According to the Hungry Horse Ranger District, at least six bridges and stretches of road were destroyed or damaged. The Sullivan Creek bridge was reported missing. In the Hungry Horse News, U.S. Forest Service engineer Glenn Weeks said, "that bridge is gone. We haven't even found it yet. It could have floated into the reservoir by now."

Burlington Northern did not escape damage from the flood, losing nearly a quarter mile of track. Service was disrupted; passengers were bussed around the area and freight trains were rerouted or delayed.

Many homeowners had flooded basements and garages. The West Glacier golf course was under water, and homes in the area were in danger of flooding.

## "It was a threatening sound, a hissing as it flowed past"

Bob and Marie Schrankel of West Glacier told the Hungry Horse News they did "a lot of sweating" Saturday night and Sunday morning. The couple spent a sleepless night watching water come to within an inch of their front door. "I'm a big city boy and not used to this," Schrankel said. "I've been through hurricanes and lightning storms, but this was our first flood. It was not a very pleasant thing at all." Homeowner Martha Sloan lives near the golf course above the river. She told the Hungry Horse News that "the sounds of the November flood reminded me of the devastating high water of 1964. The river made the same terrifying noise. It was a threatening sound like in 1964, a hissing as it flowed past."

In the midst of all the concern for lives and property, the flooding also produced a few pleasant surprises. The flood cleaned up much of the debris along the Middle Fork. Kim Potter told the Hungry Horse News, "it appeared nearly every log and stump piled up since the great 1964 flood has been washed to a new place or is gone entirely." Officials at Kerr Dam near Polson reported flood waters raised the level of Flathead Lake two feet over the weekend of November 10-12th. In winter the water is sometimes drawn down for hydropower generation, so the additional water is welcome.

# House slam-dunked by Libby Creek

The same combination of November snowmelt and heavy rains that flooded basements in the Flathead area claimed an entire house in Lincoln County. Early on the morning of November 12th, the Jerry Fisher family home near the Highway 2 bridge collapsed into Libby Creek. The family had safely evacuated the house, mindful of previous close calls in 1974 and 1975.

Jim Morey, Lincoln County Commissioner, told the Western News he watched helplessly as the house settled into the creek, then leveled itself on the water

and began turning slowly toward the bridge as the windows popped out. "When it hit the bridge the floor just went on underneath and the rest of the house was up against it," Morey said. "The house became a dam as it pressed against the bridge, and debris and downed trees — some enormous — came to rest against it." Crews had to dismantle the house and roof to keep it from damaging or destroying the bridge. A washed out 7,200 volt power line presented further danger to workers and had to be shut down. Fortunately, the Fishers were able to remove almost all of their possessions before the house washed away.

Other roads and bridges were damaged and basements flooded in the Libby area. County crews successfully kept water from breaking through at the Libby Creek bridge and flooding nearby low-lying residential areas.

## Board amends Administrative Rules—communities must amend ordinances

The Board of Natural Resources and Conservation has recently amended the Administrative Rules for floodplain management, ARM 36.15.101 through 36.15.903. Proposed rule changes were published in the June 15 Administrative Register. The final rules as amended by the Board at its September 11 meeting have been filed with the Secretary of State in the Administrative Rules of Montana.

A number of major changes were adopted by the Board. Designation of floodplains is now based on base flood elevations, and more stringent requirements were adopted for storing and disposing of petroleum products and solid and hazardous waste. Storage of petroleum products in buried containers within the floodplain is now prohibited. The purpose of this standard is to prevent contamination of waterways and aquifers because buried tanks eventually develop leaks. Individual and multiple family sewage disposal systems are also prohibited in the floodway but are allowed within the floodway fringe only if they are reviewed and approved by either a county health board or the Department of Health and Environmental Sciences. If there is no reviewing agency, then they are prohibited in designated flood-fringe areas. Manufactured home regulations follow the federal standards established by recent changes in the National Flood Insurance Program. There are also specific standards for alteration of designated floodplains and floodways that did not exist before.

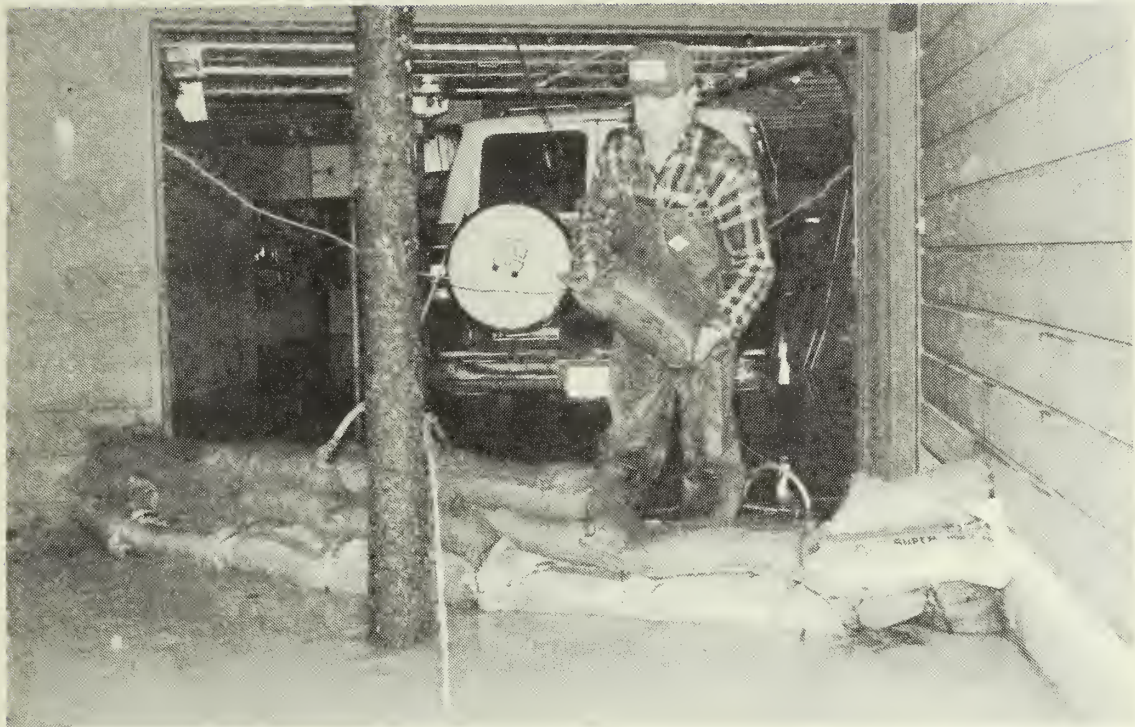
Perhaps the most significant change affecting local floodplain administrators involves the requirement for public notice of all permit and variance actions. A public notice must be advertised in a local newspaper of general circulation in the area to solicit comments before issuing a permit.

In addition to the changes already mentioned, there were several new definitions added and some general housekeeping accomplished. The rule amendments were intended to comply with federal standards and to address issues recently brought before the Board. Some of the new rules were adopted to clarify floodplain management policy as practiced by the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.

Because the Board has amended the administrative rules, all municipalities and counties that adopted the Board's standards pursuant to §76-5-301, 302, MCA must now amend their local regulations. A timeframe for local adoption has not been established, but it is anticipated to be approximately one year. DNRC is drafting a model floodplain ordinance to assist local governments in implementing the Board's rules. The model will be presented to the Board at the March 5 and 6, 1990, meeting for approval. Upon Board approval, it will be distributed to local officials to help them meet the new requirements.

See the sidebar for the communities and counties affected by the Board's new rules that are required to amend their floodplain ordinances.





Walt Forsman's West Glacier home was spared serious water damage by 40 sandbags.

Brian Kennedy photo

The Board has designated floodplains for the Clark Fork river near the Town of Plains in Sanders County and Pipestone Creek in the Town of Whitehall. The Whitehall Town Council and Sanders County Commissioners have not adopted the Board's standards, so DNRC is empowered to administer floodplain regulations in these areas.

Communities other than those mentioned above have adopted floodplain regulations under authority provided by statutes other than the Floodplain and Floodway Management Act, 76-5, parts 1-4, MCA to qualify for participation in the National Flood Insurance Program. Municipalities have authority under 7-1-4123, MCA to enact ordinances to promote the public health and welfare. Floodplain ordinances are designed to protect life, property, and general welfare. Title 76-Chapter 2, MCA enables counties and municipalities to adopt zoning ordinances that may include floodplain regulations. These statutes stipulate that ordinances can only be adopted after following a specific procedure. Local officials may wish to check their legal authority for adopting floodplain ordinances to be sure their actions are in accordance with statutes.

If you wish to receive a copy of the new rules and you don't have access to the ARMs, copies are available from the Floodplain Management Section, DNRC, 1520 E. 6th Ave., Helena, Montana 59620.

## CITIES/TOWNS

Baker  
Belt  
Billings  
Chester  
Chinook  
Choteau  
Deer Lodge  
Denton  
Dillon  
Drummond  
East Helena  
Eureka  
Fromberg  
Grass Range

Great Falls  
Harlem  
Harlowton  
Helena  
Joliet  
Kalispell  
Laurel  
Lavina  
Lewistown  
Libby  
Lima  
Livingston  
Lodge Grass  
Malta

Miles City  
Missoula  
Moore  
Philipsburg  
Plains  
Red Lodge  
Ryegate  
Sidney  
Three Forks  
Troy  
Whitefish  
Wibaux

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Big Horn County  
Blaine County  
Butte-Silver Bow County  
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Fallon County  
Fergus County  
Flathead County

Gallatin County  
Golden Valley County  
Granite County  
Hill County  
Lake County  
Lewis & Clark County  
Lincoln County  
Missoula  
Park County  
Phillips County

Powell County  
Ravalli County  
Richland County  
Stillwater County  
Sweet Grass County  
Teton County  
Valley County  
Wheatland County  
Wibaux County  
Yellowstone County

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